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ABSTRACT

One of the first papers that Freshman Composition instructors still teach is the expressive or personal experience essay. Native English Speaking (NES) instructors who teach expressive writing believe that students looking back on their past selves gain new perspectives or reach new understanding of themselves or their world. This discovery often begins with dissonance. In the resolution of students' dissonance lies the opportunity for reflection and insight. Dissonance occurs with international students who, newly arrived in the United States, are asked in their composition classes to write a personal experience essay. Faced with the prospect of having to write a paper specifically designed for an "I" conscious culture, how does the student from a "we" conscious culture reconcile the gap? One way is to ignore the expressive constraint and write informatively from a collective standpoint. Another way is to circumvent the expressive constraint and write fiction. When international students face the dissonance, they find their own way around the boundaries; they do not need the instructors' help to cross them nor to resolve their dissonance. (Contains 17 references.) (CR)

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Breaking the Constraints of Silence: The Stories of International Students

One of the first papers that Freshman Composition instructors still teach is the expressive, or personal experience, essay. This type of writing is usually taught early in the freshman writing course chiefly because it requires no search for material other than students' memories. That's one reason. Another reason concerns the act of discovery.

As I've noted in "Writing Expressive Discourse: ESL and Native English Speaking Freshmen," "Writing as a way of learning, as a form of creative inquiry, and as exploration are all involved in the writing of expressive, or personal essays, as shown in the works of Flower and Hayes, Lauer, and Young,Becker & Pike. Those of us N[ative] E[nglish]S[peaking] instructors who teach expressive writing . . .believe that students looking back on their past selves gain new perspectives, or reach a new understanding, of themselves or their world" (14). This discovery often begins with dissonance.

What is dissonance? Dissonance is a challenge to a person's belief system that must be resolved. The two beliefs cannot coexist as they are. For instance, a Christian student experiences dissonance when his or her long-held belief of Christ's virgin birth is challenged by historical evidence of several virgin births of saviors in different religions. Students may resolve the dissonance in various ways. They may totally reject the new idea; or they may reject their faith; or they may gain a new perspective of the situation . The resolution of dissonance seems analagous to Peter Elbow's "embracing contraries,"or "productive tension," as defined in Lovitt and Young (115), and also Albert Rothenberg's "Janusian thinking" in which we find that the formulation of "simultaneous antitheses" creates a new entity, or perspective (55).

In the resolution of students' dissonance lies the opportunity for reflection, and ultimately insight. In her work, "Measuring Insight in Student Writing, " Mary Murray notes that "dissonance is a prerequisite, and resolution a facilitator, in gaining increased understanding or

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insight (50). We who teach expressive writing believe that reflection and resolution often lead students to discover a new perspective about themselves, others, or the world.

Dissonance occurs with international students who, newly-arrived in the U.S., are asked in their composition classes to write a personal experience essay. In most cases individualism is anathema to their collective culture, and so they have had little or no experience in self-revelation. As quoted in Samovar and Porter, in the 1980s Geert Hofstede, a Dutch researcher, interviewed more than 100,000 workers "in multinational organizations in forty countries" (88) and discovered that one of the major aspects in cultural behavior concerned individualism versus collectivism. In a culture where individualism is high, an "I" consciousness prevails; while in a culture where individualism is low and collectivism is high, a "we" consciousness prevails.

In the eighties the United States rated highest of all international groups in exhibiting individualism, or an "I" consciousness, followed closely by Australia, Great Britain, Canada, the Netherleands, and New Zealand. On the other hand, South American, Mideastern and Asian countries, exhibited high collectivism, or a "we" consciousness.

Despite the fact that most of our international students come from cultures exhibiting high collectivism, in my own experience--having taught international students for over ten years--and in talking with other instructors, no international student I know of, has ever refused to write an expressive paper. So does that mean we are helping them to break the cultural constraints of their silence? I don't think so.

Faced, then, with the prospect of having to write a paper specifically designed for an "I" consciousness culture, how does the student from a "we" consciousness culture reconcile the gap?

To give you an example of two different methods used to reconcile the gap--I'll show you the prompt I'm currently using in a project on researching heritage followed by the written introductions of one American student and one Japanese student. Then I'll show you the prompt that produced the second method as seen in the written introduction of a Chinese student

The first prompt consisted of the following:

> Define "heritage" [in your own words], and describe the influence it has had on you in several areas of your life, such as character, lifestyle, values and beliefs. (Dixon 10)

Following are the written introductions of two students in the same class, the first from an American woman, Mary, and the second from a Japanese woman, Koriko:

Mary's Introduction

> Heritage, although not chosen, is one of the greatest determining factors in who a person is. It is what makes every family special, and every person unique. It is a gift that my ancestors bestowed upon me by triumphing over their struggles, being themselves, and just living their lives. Whether they did good or bad, it is now mine forever. It can never be taken away because it is within me, a part of me that cannot be separated. My heritage is in my actions, my words, my personality.

Koriko's Introduction

> Heritage is sharing ideas, value of experience, belief in society, and its concept retains over generations. In every culture, there is a crucial coordination between developing individuals and social environment. The individual's life course must be understood in the context of external influences such as historical, parental, and regional culture. The character structures are linked with the individual structure, and the environment I grow up has particular social aspect and influence on my entire life.

In comparing the two introductions, note that Mary has no difficulty relating heritage to the individual, specifically to herself: "my ancestors," "my heritage," "my actions," etc.; whereas Koriko uses words that connote a more collective ideology: "society," "social environment," "social aspect," etc.

In the second method of reconciling the gap, Ken, a young Chinese male from Singapore, wrote movingly about his family who had been forced to leave Hong Kong before the changeover and about life in Singapore. The prompt consisted of a popular, expressive assignment that asks students to write about a significant place in their lives. The following is Ken's written introduction:

> I am an emigrant who had migrated to Singapore from Hong Kong. I came with my parents and a little sister. We had just been here for two weeks and in this short period, I discovered what a wonderful place this was. Before I came here, I was very sad with the prospect of coming here. My heart shuttered into pieces when I was told by my father that we would be residing here permanently. The thoughts of leaving my friends and relatives made me go hysterical. Especially my girl-friend, whom I had left behind, had been crying for days. But now, amidst my sorrows I discovered a paradise which inspires my sense of beauty.

From thereon Ken describes Singapore in great detail. When I interviewed him later about this significant place in his life, I asked him something about Hong Kong and was surprised to hear his answer: he'd never been there! His entire introduction had been a fiction. He also told me that among the four papers he'd written that semester (*2 expressive, 1 evaluation, 1 collaborative review*), this "significant place" paper had been his favorite--because it reminded him of home in Singapore, and it made him happy to write about it.

So how do international students resolve the dissonance? As we've seen, one way is to ignore the expressive constraint and write informatively from a collective standpoint as Koriko did. Another way is to circumvent the expressive contraint and write fiction as Ken did.

Sandra J. Savignon, author of the second language learning text, *Communicative Competence:Theory and Classroom Practice*, .states: "The strategies that one uses to compensate for imperfect knowledge of rules . . . may be characterized as *strategic competence" (40)* It appears that international students compensate for "imperfect knowledge of" culture and use strategic competence when they alter the "I" component in expressive writing

In both writing assignments, Koriko and Ken experienced dissonance: their native, collective consciousness versus the United States' individual consciousness. And both used strategic competence to resolve it. A frequently cited article on this subject,"The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as a key to learning English composition" was written by Fan Shen, a Chinese student. The article tells us that in order to write expressively, the author had to invent an "English I." So when Ken uses fiction to fulfill the assignment on a significant place in his life, he chooses a narrator other than himself, which might be considered an "American I." Indeed the narrator in his paper seems more American than Chinese as he "goes hysterical" at the thought of leaving his friends and relatives.

International students critically analyze their writing assignments and approach each task by using strategic competence to resolve the dissonance. The international students who write about how heritage influences their ethnic group rather than their individual person, are resolving the dissonance by making the assignment fit their collective consciousness. Koriko did so by changing the focus of the assignment from "I" to "we." Ken did so by inventing a narrator. In the first case, individualism is rejected in favor of collectivism; in the second case, individualism is accepted, but by an invented narrator, which is not all bad.

In writing fiction, the student uses the same style features as those associated by James Kinneavy with expressive writing: direct imagery, figurative imagery, superlatives, vague referents and first person pronouns (441). For those who object to fiction on the grounds that expressive writing should be honest, or true, G. Thomas Couser would remind us that memory is neither "stable" nor "static." It is "under continuous, unconscious revision" (as qtd. in Spigelman 131). In fact, some rhetorics, such as Axelrod and Cooper's *The Concise Guide to Writing* advise students, in creating dialogue, to use their speculative imagination (38).

So are we helping international students to break the constraints of their silence when we ask them to write expressively, or are we forcing them to cross boundaries they may not be ready to cross? Neither. When they face the dissonance, they find their own way around the boundaries; they don't need our help to cross them, nor to resolve their dissonance. In

circumventing the expressive writing assignment, these students show use of strategic competence, which appears to be a form of critical thinking.

The only silence that international students break is when, instead of writing expressively, they either use expository prose to write with pride about their country or else create an American "I" as narrator--to write with pride about their culture.

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